

Gardner, Fay Webb ^[1]

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By Erika S. Fairchild, 1986

See Also: [Maxwell Oliver Gardner](#) ^[2], [Fay Webb Gardner](#) ^[3]

7 Sept. 1885–16 Jan. 1969

Businesswoman, civic leader, and wife of North Carolina governor [Oliver Max Gardner](#) ^[4], was born in Shelby, the younger of two daughters of James L. and Kansas Andrews Webb. Her family had long been prominent in the Shelby area. Her paternal great-grandfather, the Reverend James Milton Webb, was the first pastor of the First Baptist Church of Shelby. Her father, a superior court judge, was active in local politics, as was her uncle, E. Yates Webb, who was a U.S. congressman and federal judge. After attending public schools in Shelby, she went to Lucy Cobb School for Girls in Athens, Ga., from which she was graduated in 1905. She spent two years traveling in Europe before her marriage in 1907 to Oliver Max Gardner of Shelby.

Much of Mrs. Gardner's activity during the next forty years was defined by her husband's career as Shelby lawyer and businessman, state legislator, lieutenant governor, governor, Washington lawyer, and assistant secretary of the Treasury. "Miss Fay," as she was known to the North Carolina public as well as to her friends and acquaintances, became well known for her hospitality, her graciousness, and her attractiveness of dress and demeanor. Indefatigable in her efforts to promote civic and cultural improvements, she was active in the [Red Cross](#) ^[5], [the Civic League](#) ^[6], the Garden Club, [the League of Women Voters](#) ^[7], the Saint Cecilia Music Club, [the North Carolina Symphony Society](#) ^[8], the Twentieth Century Literary Club, and numerous other organizations. In addition, she was a member of the [United Daughters of the Confederacy](#) ^[9], the [Daughters of the American Revolution](#) ^[10], and the [Colonial Dames of America](#) ^[11].

Mrs. Gardner also displayed executive abilities in less conventional roles. She owned and managed business properties, was an executive of Cleveland Cloth Mills of Shelby, and was director of Gardner Land Company. In 1942, she and her husband took up the challenge of revitalizing the near-bankrupt [Boiling Springs Junior College](#) ^[12], a small, church-related institution nine miles from Shelby. During the following years, they gave unstintingly of both time and money to achieve financial and academic viability for the institution, whose grateful board of trustees renamed it [Gardner-Webb College](#) ^[13] in honor of Mrs. Gardner's family as well as that of the former governor. Mrs. Gardner served as trustee of the college and as president of the Gardner Foundation, which was instrumental in preserving the school.

Her allegiance and devotion to the Democratic party, nurtured during her childhood, were manifested both before and after her husband's death. In addition to her campaigning activities, she served on the state and national democratic committees and was twice elected a delegate to the Democratic National Convention. She helped to arrange several important Washington politico-social events including President Harry S Truman's birthday dinner in 1954 and John Kennedy's inaugural ball in 1961. In 1949, she was chosen chairman of the women's committee for the Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner in Washington, D.C.

The Gardners had four children: Margaret Love Gardner Burgess (b. 1908), James (1910–46), Ralph (b. 1912), and Oliver Max, Jr. (1922–61).

Mrs. Gardner's personal diaries and scrapbooks, which are at Gardner-Webb College, are an important source of information on the governorship of Oliver Max Gardner as well as on other facets of their life together. In addition to her scrapbooks about the governor's term in office, her papers include genealogical data, a governor's mansion diary for the years 1929–33, and a European travel diary of 1927.

She was buried in Sunset Cemetery, Shelby.

References:

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